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Your chance to help chart past climate

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Voyages of World War One Royal Navy warships are being used to help scientists understand the climate of the past and unearth new historical information, with help from the public.

Small section of the Met Office archive

Visitors to the website OldWeather.org, which launches today, are being invited to input weather observations of the routes taken by any of 280 Royal Navy ships. Once on the website, volunteers will be asked to transcribe information from the digital copies of historical logbooks, making notes of weather and any interesting events.

Dr Peter Stott, Head of Climate Monitoring and Attribution at the Met Office, said: "Historical weather data is vital because it allows us to test our models of the Earth's climate: if we can correctly account for what the weather was doing in the past, then we can have more confidence in our predictions of the future. Unfortunately, the historical record is full of gaps, particularly from before 1920, and at sea, so this project is invaluable."

Dr Chris Lintott of Oxford University, one of the team behind the OldWeather.org project added: "These naval logbooks contain an amazing treasure trove of information, but because the entries are handwritten they are incredibly difficult for a computer to read. By getting an army of online human volunteers to retrace these voyages and transcribe the information recorded by British sailors we can relive both the climate of the past and key moments in naval history."

OldWeather.org forms a key part of the International ACRE Project, which is recovering past weather and climate data from around the world and bringing them into widespread use. Met Office Hadley Centre scientist Dr Rob Allan, the ACRE project leader said: "Reconstructing past weather from these historical documents will help further our knowledge of weather patterns and climatic changes."

Most of the data about past climate comes from land-based weather monitoring stations which have been systematically recording data for over 150 years. The weather information from the ships at OldWeather.org, which spans the period 1905–1929, effectively extends this land-based network to 280 seaborne weather stations traversing the world's oceans.

The weather records digitised by Old Weather will be added to the International Comprehensive Ocean-Atmosphere Data Set, and will be freely available for all uses.

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